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108-172 New state program looking for Iowa's Great Places

By Chuck Schoffner
Associated Press

DES MOINES - Anita Walker and her team are trying to get Iowans to brag a little.

Everywhere she goes, Walker hears residents talk about how great it is to live in their town or region, whether it's because of a lake, the peaceful countryside, a historical neighborhood or the friendly people.

So, she tells them, why not let everybody else know about it?

That's idea behind the Iowa Great Places initiative, a program that will use the resources of 18 state agencies to help cities or regions showcase their strengths and unique features. The goal is to attract people, which in turn might attract jobs. Or at least draw tourists.

"When you have great places for people to live, they become great places for entrepreneurs to start a business," Walker, director of the Iowa Department of Cultural Affairs, said during an interview with reporters and edi-

tors from The Associated Press. "They become great places for businesses to locate because they know there is an ability to attract a work force."

Walker has been promoting "Great Places" since Gov. Tom Vilsack announced the program in March. A native of Southern California, Walker has found Iowans to be a self-deprecating lot. They're proud of their state, but reluctant to talk it up.

Part of her job has been prodding communities to speak out for themselves by taking part in Great Places.

"There is no shortage of creativity in this state," Walker said. "What we need is confidence."

That became apparent to Walker at a recent meeting for southwest Iowa communities, when participants were asked to describe a great place.

"Every single one of them described the place where they lived," she said. "So it isn't the fact that people can't recognize what's good. I think what's lacking is the confidence to take that

and capitalize on it."

That is where the Great Places program comes in, an effort Walker describes as one-stop shopping for help.

It starts with a community, organization or region submitting a proposal to make their area a better place to live. It doesn't have to be a new building or highway improvements. It could be extending a trail, showcasing a scenic byway, a main street business district or a neighborhood of Victorian homes.

Two consultants, called "coaches," then will work with local organizers to determine which state programs could help them.

Do they need a historical preservation tax break or assistance from the Housing Finance Authority? Maybe they need expertise from the Department of Transportation or Department of Natural Resources. The communities won't have to figure that out. That will be the job of the 40 state employees who are being trained as coaches.